

CHAMETZ AND HONEY

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Chametz and Honey - Why Don't They Belong?

At a recent dental convention (actually it was three dentists that got together in a living room to "talk teeth"), to the great shock of their dining-room attendant (the ba'alebusta), the vegetable platter she had prepared was left untouched. The plate of sweets and cakes, on the other hand, was completely devoured.

We all appreciate a good sweet. Give a person the choice between, say, a milchige truffle and a plate of kasha, and what's he going to choose?

When bringing a korban (offering), we are told we should give Hashem from our fattest and choicest animals. So what is wrong with adding a little honey? A touch of honey could turn our roasted offering into a marinate; our flour/meal offering into a sweetcake. Yet the Torah strictly forbids it (2:11). Similarly, the Torah forbids us to use yeast in our offerings all-year-round. For the most part, all flour offerings were kosher le'Pesach - even in Tishrei! Given the choice, most people would prefer a freshly-baked challah over a matzah (not to mention bagels and cream cheese). But the Torah insists: "For all types of yeast, and all types of honey, may not be offered upon the fires of Hashem."

The Sefer HaChinuch (117) explains the prohibition as follows: Generally, korbanos (sacrifices) are brought by someone requiring atonement. In what way does slaughtering an animal upon an altar grant forgiveness? The person bringing the offering should have the following thought: Since I have sinned, I should, in truth, be going through the process of slaughter and death in order to atone for my sins. Hashem, in an act of great compassion, has given me the opportunity to take an animal from my possessions, and offer it in my stead. The process of preparation for slaughter should thus be overseen by the person bringing the offering, in the hope that it will impress upon him the severity of his sin, and he will thus achieve full atonement.

This, he explains, is why the Torah forbids honey and yeast. Sin is rooted in one (or both) of two faults: Laziness and desire. The prohibition against yeast (and any sort of leaven) alludes to the sinner that if he desires to repent, he must acquire the trait of zerizus - enthusiasm and alacrity - unlike leaven which only occurs when dough is left unattended to rise. The prohibition against honey hints to the sinner that sin is also rooted in an unbridled preoccupation with satisfying one's desires. The repentant must recognize that learning to "saddle the sweet tooth" is also a critical ingredient in the recipe for teshuva.

Rabbi Shmuel, son of the famous Tzemach Tdedek, explains that the Torah alludes here to two character traits, each of which, if taken to extreme proportions, can be very harmful. "Leaven," he explains, is symbolic of the kind of person who is constantly bitter and angry at the world. Chametz, leaven, is of the same root as chamutz, sourness. This person walks around with a chip on his shoulder. He is always critical, and has a hard time seeing the good in anything. Life may not be a bowl of cherries, but for him, it often seems like a mouthful of sour cherries.

"Honey," by contrast, is symbolic of the person who is overly sweet and affable. Nothing ever phases them or gets them angry. They have a hard time seeing evil in anyone, and are in danger of measuring the wicked and the righteous with the same yard stick.

By forbidding both leaven and honey, the Torah teaches that one must learn to control his emotions, even positive ones, and not take things to extremes. There are times when it is appropriate to be "leaven," and times when it is appropriate to be "honey."

While this may not be the appropriate platform to talk pro-sports, it is no secret that both professional and amateur sports today are plagued with a most alarming drug problem. Athletes no longer rely solely on training and hard work. Today, athletic excellence has two critical factors: Your body and your barbiturates. Many athletes claim that without performance-enhancing hormones, they wouldn't stand a chance against their peers.

I am no budding athlete, nor do I take much of an interest in professional sports, yet I believe that from a moral standpoint, it is a sad reflection on the state of our society that great performance is no longer simply a question of "how you workout", but rather of "what you're taking," and how good you are at concealing it from the authorities. What's next? Genetic modification? Will we take a strand of hair from the best athletes of yesteryear, and fill our fields and stadiums with their clones? One shudders.

The Torah advocates bringing one's fattest and choicest animals for an offering. Only the best. Yeast and honey, however, are external catalysts, one which induces the leavening process, the other having the ability to make the sour sweet. Perhaps the Torah's message, in forbidding these items, is to allude to us that while we must indeed sacrifice to the Almighty our choicest and our best, it is the best we have to offer that Hashem wants, and not some doped-up, hormonally hyperactive mutation we've cooked up in a laboratory. While matzah and meat may not measure up to muffins and marinate, it is that which dwells in man's heart that Hashem truly desires, pure and untainted.

Have a good Shabbos.

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